ROB, THE PEDDLER'S BOY

RARE indeed were the merry times when King Charles the Second ruled in England, even though he was called the Merry Monarch. There was, instead, a great deal of suffering and misery among the poorer classes in England, in those days, though some people are always saying that the old times everywhere were better than the new; but of that I, for one, am not so sure. Certainly, the old city of London, for its size, was quite as full of wickedness, and dirt, and misery, as London is to-day. But, dear me, what a different London! Now it is one of the greatest cities of the world and full of beautiful buildings, fine houses, great shops; but, in those old

times, it was a small town with narrow, crooked, unpaved streets, thickly crowded with houses that leaned up against each other, and toppled over at each other, and thrust out their upper stories almost across the streets. There were no sidewalks, only posts driven into the mud on each side, and the foot passengers must keep within these, while the great emblazoned coaches, carts, sedan chairs, and wheel-barrows trundled and rumbled through the filth in the centre, splashing it freely upon the people. Thus it came to be considered so great a privilege to get on the inside, next the houses, that there were often street brawls about "taking the wall," as they called it; and sometimes people were pelted with vegetables from the wheel-barrows, and mud from the kennel, as they named the great gutter in the middle of the street. There were no street lamps then, either, and it was considered a great thing when a man, called Edward Heming, proposed to light London, on moonless nights, from Michaelmas to Lady Day, by hanging a lantern on every tenth door, from six o'clock until twelve. There were more pick-pockets and vagabonds, too, then than now, and it was very dangerous to walk in the streets, even after Mr. Heming hung up his

little lanterns on every tenth door, — a tiny yellow flicker of a candle in the darkness of the night. The town was full of beggars, too, and thieves, and evil-minded persons, and there were very few people to heed or care for the wretched little children who played, half naked, in the mud, while the king and the great people drove by in wonderful gilt coaches that were shaped vastly like apple-pies, — very broad and flat on top, and narrow at the bottom, with glass sides and wonderful colors, and gold and silver on the outside. They were drawn usually by gray Flanders mares, with outriders in the gayest of gay liveries.

There was only one bridge over the river Thames then, too; quite a strange bridge, with rows of houses on each side of it, and only a narrow road between for the coaches and people to pass over; and yonder was the great gloomy Tower of London, where prisoners of state were shut up.

In this strange old city of London, in a miserable old house on the Strand, there lived a little lad called Rob, the peddler's boy. He had no other name, and scarcely knew that it was odd for a little boy to have only one short name. He was about twelve years old, and small for his age; a thin, ill-

used child, with a pinched little face and sad dark eyes; and his clothes — the few he had — were so faded and ragged that you could not possibly have told what they looked like when they were new. As for shoes and stockings, he remembered none, and he was so neglected that his hair — which was a pretty auburn color — was often tangled and uncombed, unless he remembered to comb it, which, I fear, was not very often, for poor Rob had a hard life — the life of a street beggar. He was beaten when he failed to bring money home, and beaten when he brought it, so that it made no difference, a beating and a crust were his daily portion. For Rob had for a master a terrible old man, a peddler by trade, a miser, and, I fear, a thief. The boy did not know how he came to be in this old man's clutches, or what relation he was to him. He thought he was his grandfather; but then it was only a dim idea, after all, for when he came to consider the matter, he did not know whether he was or not; no one ever told him so, least of all old Jacob Cheezer, who had few words for him and many blows. He was a little, thin, old man, with stooping shoulders and such a dark face that Rob thought it seemed to absorb all the light in the room and make it dingy, even at

noonday; and he had such cruel little eyes, keen and restless, and able to see — so the boy thought — as well out of the back of his head as out of the front; and his hands were thin and the fingers like the talons of a bird of prey, fierce, and strong, and keen-pointed; and though he was so small he had the strength of two men. Old Cheezer wore clothes almost as shabby as Rob's: a faded, weather-worn green coat, with full petticoated skirts — a fashion they had then — and the sleeves came only to the elbow, so as to show the ruffled shirt sleeve below; and old Jacob's full black trousers, tied at the knees with faded ribbons, were patched with almost as many colors as Joseph's coat, in the Bible, and his long waistcoat was flowered like an old calico spread.

This strange couple lived in the most rickety old shanty, two stories high; the upper story hanging out over the lower one, as they often did then. It stood with its back toward the Thames and its face toward the road, and was one of the many old rookeries. There were some nice houses there, too, with neat gardens on the river bank, but here and there were just such tumble-down shanties as that of old Jacob. It stood near to the great Maypole, set up

by the Duke of York, the king's brother, to celebrate the Restoration of the royal family to England.

There was a garden — or rather there had been one, now it was only a plot of ground — behind Cheezer's house, and it was walled in by a high brick wall; a strange thing, too, when the house was so wretched, but old Jacob kept that wall repaired, and you could not see into it, even from the river, while his own window shutters were all nailed up on that side — and he had a very good reason for that, as you shall hear. His house, too, was not near the others, and no one entered it but himself and the boy, Rob; indeed, if any one even came to the door, old Jacob drove him away with abuse. He had a slit in the floor of the room that overhung the door, and through this he could not only see who stopped there, but he could throw stones down upon them. So it was only a very bold person who came twice to Cheezer's door; in fact, the people in the neighborhood thought him crazy and left him alone.

Inside the house it was quite as dismal as it was outside. There was no furniture except in Cheezer's room; he had a bed, a chair, and an old chest, but

Rob lay upon straw on the kitchen floor and he ate his meals — what there was of them — with his fingers, off an old tin plate on the hearth, and was happiest when he could eat out of doors, beyond the old man's reach. Every morning — rain or shine — Rob went out to beg in London and was pushed and knocked about, occasionally getting a few coins in his cap but more often a kick or a blow, for no one was very mindful of a beggar lad. He begged here and he begged there; sometimes in busy Fleet Street, sometimes in front of the great Cathedral of St. Paul, and sometimes even at the gate of Whitehall, the king's palace; and when he came home empty handed he was beaten almost to death. That was the child's life, begging, and beating, and starving, day in and day out; it was not unlike the lives of many other little children in this great world of ours — not only in those days, but now.

But there was one thing in old Jacob's garden that interested Rob: every night, when he lay half starved and sore on his straw, he heard Cheezer creeping out into the garden, closing the door softly behind him, and once, when the boy stirred, the man heard him, and came back to beat him anew, and tell him, that if he dared so much as to

peep into the garden at night, he would put out his eyes. As he was quite wicked enough to do it, poor Rob lay trembling all the rest of the night. But, after all, he was a boy, and we grow used to any danger that is familiar, and Rob grew used to this, and he grew also very curious. What did the old man do in that garden? He was gone a long, long time, and he went every night. Rob racked his active young brains for an answer, but he got none, unless — perhaps old Jacob was dealing with some witch or fairy! It must be a very wicked fairy, Rob reflected; but even then — a fairy! Well, it was more than flesh and blood could withstand, and next time old Jacob went out and shut the door, Rob crept softly off his straw and peeped through the keyhole, the only opening, because, as I have said, every window on the garden was boarded up. It was a moonlight night, and Rob saw the bare, dreary-looking garden, with its high brick wall, as clearly as at noonday. Nothing grew there but weeds and one old gnarled pear tree that had never borne even a blossom in Rob's remembrance. Breathless with fright and excitement, the boy peeped and peeped, and he saw a strange thing. Old Jacob walked all around the

garden three times, peering into every corner, and then he went to the old pear tree and knelt at its roots, as if he meant to say his prayers. This greatly surprised and frightened Rob, as he had never known Jacob to pray, and he made sure that the dreadful old man must be going to die. But Cheezer did not die; nor did he pray; he only — to all appearances — took up a lump of the solid earth, and reaching down into the hole beneath it, pulled up a bag and looked into it; then he put something into the bag, replaced it, put the lump of earth back again, went around the garden three times, and started for the door. You can imagine just how Rob scampered back to his straw and pretended to be asleep when the old man came in. Whether Jacob suspected him or not, Rob did not know, but he came to the spot where the boy lay, and peered at him sharply, and then hobbled off upstairs while the child trembled with fright.

But curiosity had got the better of Rob, and he only waited his opportunity now; it came the very next day, when he returned from a begging expedition with better luck than usual, and brought old Cheezer nearly a guinea in small coins. The peddler grabbed it greedily, searched the boy's

pockets, as usual, and finding no more, dismissed him with a kick, and immediately put on his shabby old hat and went out. This was so unusual that Rob could hardly believe it, but fastened the door after him, as he always did when he was to stay alone in the house, and then — and then! He flew through the house and out into the garden; now was his chance to fathom the mystery. Poor boy, poor little Rob, he had no idea of what it would lead to. He ran straight to the spot where he had seen Cheezer kneel, and dropped on his own knees; but having proceeded so far he was at a loss, for he saw no hole in the earth; no, nor any sign of one. But he was not a boy to be easily fooled, and he began to feel of the ground very carefully, all over the space at that side of the pear tree, but without success; and he was afraid, too, that old Jacob would return and, if he did not find him at the door to let him in, would suspect that he had been in the garden, and then what would happen? Rob shuddered, and was just on the point of giving up the search, when his busy fingers suddenly felt something hard in the soft earth, — hard and round. He had hold of it, in an instant: it was an iron ring, and it was fastened in the ground, for it would

not move, and when he pulled it, the earth began to move. Ah, now the boy understood, and with all his might and main he pulled and hauled at that ring, and lo, up came an iron lid covered with earth, and beneath was a square hole, large enough and deep enough to hold Rob himself, if it had not been already nearly half full of bags that bulged out, filled with something. Trembling with excitement and fear of Jacob's return, the boy thrust his hand into the topmost bag and drew forth a handful of money. Yes, money; some of it the money that he had begged himself, but much more of it money that old Cheezer had obtained in many, many ways. Rob knew that all the bags were full and bulging with gold, and that there must be a great deal there; but before he could look any farther he heard Jacob at the front door. In the greatest fright he put back the lid, scratched the earth over the crevices, and fled into the house, barring the back door before he opened the front. He was dreadfully afraid that Jacob would see the dirt on his hands and suspect, but for some reason the old man only noticed him by a kick, and went in and began to cook a fat chicken that he had bought with some of Rob's money. It smelled very nice while it was cooking,

and the boy was very hungry; but he only got the bones, for old Cheezer ate enormously, and one chicken was nothing to him if he had fasted since breakfast. So Rob saw him eat it greedily, his little eyes glittering as he smacked his lips, and then he threw the bones to the boy with a piece of stale bread, bidding him eat and go to bed at once, as he was going to be busy and wanted no brats about. So, still very hungry, after his bones and dry bread, Rob crept into his straw and pretended to go to sleep, all the while watching the peddler as sharply as he dared. Jacob waited until he thought the child was asleep, and then he crept out into the garden, went three times around it, and solemnly approached his treasure; but there he stopped short and stared, for on top of the hidden lid he saw a cock's feather. A harmless thing, certainly, but how did it come there? Jacob could not imagine; he scratched his head and stared at it, and it was a long time before he lifted the lid and looked greedily at his money-bags; for Jacob was a miser, and he loved his money better than his life. He did not discover that Rob had been there before him, and after a while he went in and to bed, and dreamed that every coin in his bags had turned

into three coins, and that he was the richest man in London.

But Jacob was destined to trouble, and the next night he found a cock's feather, and then again the third night, a cock's feather. What did it mean? There were no cocks, or hens either, except in Jacob's stomach, and as he could not account for the feathers, he began to suspect Rob, though why Rob should put cocks' feathers there, he could not imagine. However, he resolved to know why; and so, the next day he hid himself to watch, and Rob thought he had gone out; indeed, the cunning old fellow did pretend to go out, and unluckily it came into the boy's head to have another peep at all that gold. Out he ran into the garden, a poor, little, ragged figure, enough to move any one to pity instead of anger, and he knelt down and felt for the ring and found it, and tugged and tugged until the lid came off; and he was just bending down to peep at the bags, when a hand grabbed him at the nape of the neck, and he looked up into the ugly face of old Cheezer, terrible in its anger, for the miser was beside himself with rage.

"So, so!" he said, "so, I have found my cock's feather, and now I will put out your eyes!"

Poor Rob fell to entreating him to spare his eyes.

"Beat me, starve me!" cried the boy, trembling in an agony of fear, for he knew that Jacob was quite wicked enough to execute his threat; "do anything you please to me but that — oh, spare my eyes! Let me see still!"

"See to steal, you rogue!" cried old Cheezer, fiercely. "Not I — I'll either kill you, or put out your eyes. Which do you choose? you worthless, lazy, thieving rogue, you!"

Rob choked back his sobs; he knew that they were useless, and for one terrible moment he was in doubt. Life even to him was sweet; but eternal darkness — never to see the sky, or the earth, or other people!

"Kill me," said the boy, struggling to be quiet, to die like a brave child.

Old Cheezer chuckled fiercely, gloating over the child's misery, and he stood thinking, too; for, after all, killing was quite an awkward business. Some one might miss the child, might suspect. Then, all at once, he hit upon a plan.

"You were eager to get into this hole, you rogue," he cried, with wicked glee, "and stay in it you shall, until you die."

"You do not mean to bury me alive?" cried Rob, in horror; "you can't mean that!"

"You shall see, you thief, you shall see!" shrieked the wretched miser, dragging the boy to the house, where he bound him hand and foot. Then he took him and thrust him deep into the hole with his money bags and began to shovel the dirt in on top of him. Rob set his teeth and tried to bear it; he had chosen death and he was not a cowardly boy; he tried to be brave and resolute, but it was very horrible. The old wretch was gloating over his misery all the while, and piling in the cool, damp earth, until it was up to Rob's neck.

"Spare me, oh, spare me!" sobbed the boy, breaking down; "I do not want to die so."

"Will you have your eyes out?" jeered the wicked man.

"No," Rob replied, with quivering lips, "never!"

Jacob rested on his spade and stared at the boy maliciously.

"Do you feel like stealing now?" he asked tauntingly.

"I did not mean to steal," cried Rob, indignant.

"Oh, no!" mocked Jacob Cheezer, "of course not. Well, I'll leave you now for a bit to think